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ABSTRACT

Bush Talks is an initiative of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission that aims to identify the major human rights issues confronting rural and remote residents, to inform rural Australians about human rights, and to develop projects to advance human rights in rural Australia. This paper summarizes major issues raised by rural residents via 26 community hearings, 94 telephone comments, and 53 written submissions during 1998. These issues are: providing basic health services, ensuring fair access to education, meeting other essential needs, valuing children and young people, and building communities. Recurring themes are: consolidating services into larger regional centers has resulted in shortages of services and facilities that deprive rural residents of their rights; government funding of services on a per capita basis results in inadequate rural programs; and discrimination and insensitivity to Indigenous people, youth, aged people, immigrants, and those with disabilities leads to unequal treatment of these groups. Rural Australians do not have equal access to education. Distance education, although adequate for primary education, is a poor substitute for secondary education, and the telecommunications infrastructure is inadequate in much of rural Australia. Low expectations and culturally insensitive practices discourage Indigenous people from completing school, and students with disabilities or special needs are not well served. Tertiary education is available only in capital cities. Each section describes an issue, drawing on rural residents' comments, and presents proposals for addressing it, examples of successful initiatives, and forthcoming Commission projects addressing the issue. (TD)

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Bush Talks

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Introducing *Bush Talks*

In almost every aspect of our work, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has noticed that people in rural and remote Australia generally come off second best. Distance, isolation, lower incomes and minority status all exacerbate the experience of discrimination, harassment, and lack of services and participation.

In *Bush Talks* we have focused on rural and remote areas, inviting country people to raise all of their concerns related to human rights. The aims of *Bush Talks* have been

1. to identify the major human rights issues confronting people living beyond the main population centres
2. to inform rural and remote area Australians, and their representative organisations, about human rights
3. to develop projects to enhance the enjoyment of human rights in regional, rural and remote Australia for HREOC action in 1999 and 2000.

Bush Talks has visited every State and the Northern Territory and has also held consultations in some capital cities. We have conducted public and private, general and specific issue meetings. By the end of 1998 we had travelled to 26 communities in country Australia and many more will be reached in 1999 when *Bush Talks* visits to north-west NSW, central Queensland, Top End NT and the Kimberley and Pilbara regions of WA are planned.

Our most successful meetings have been those organised for us by local hosts, to all of whom we extend our sincere gratitude. Local governments, in particular, have been important sponsors of *Bush Talks*.

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In addition to meetings, to date we have received 94 telephone comments or enquiries and 53 written submissions from across the country.

This paper summarises the major issues raised with us in the first half of this consultation program. For more detail, readers will find notes of public *Bush Talks* meetings on the Commission's website: http://www.hreoc.gov.au (under 'News and Information').

The Commission's first responses to what we have heard – projects to begin in 1999 - are outlined at the conclusion of each section.

Chris Sidoti
Human Rights Commissioner and Acting Disability Discrimination Commissioner

Bush Talks in 1998

Where	When	Meetings
Tamworth NSW	18 March	Public meeting to launch *Bush Talks*
Wagga Wagga NSW	23-25 April	Disability Advocacy NetworkChamber of CommerceMigrant Consultation Group
Coffs Harbour NSW	7 May	Address to NSW Country Women's Association ConferencePrivate meetings
Wauchope NSW	8 May	Bunyah Land Council
Port Macquarie NSW	8-9 May	Public meeting hosted by Hastings Shire CouncilBirpai Land CouncilLaunch of MultiKulti
Burnie Tas	28 May	Creative Living CentreMeetings with community services workers Public meeting, Burnie Civic Centre
Port Augusta SA	15 June	Remote and Isolated Children's ExerciseMeeting with community services workersMeeting hosted by the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement
Orange NSW	20-21 July	Public meeting hosted by Orange City Council Meeting hosted by Orange Regional Aboriginal Land Council Secondary schools workshop
Bathurst NSW	22 July	Address to Family Support Services Association ConferenceCommunity meeting hosted by Bathurst Neighbourhood CentreSecondary schools workshop
Albany WA	10 Aug	Meeting hosted by Albany Chamber of Commerce and IndustryMen in CrisisPublic meeting hosted by Albany City CouncilTour of Albany Regional Prison
Bunbury WA	11 Aug	Wattle Hill Lodge Aged Care FacilitySeminar hosted by Legal Aid WA Meeting hosted by Bunbury Regional Hospital Meeting with young people and youth workers hosted by Agencies for South-West Accommodation
Narrogin WA	12 Aug	Wheatbelt Development CommissionPublic meeting hosted by Narrogin Town Council
Geraldton WA	11-12 Aug	Ministry of JusticeYamatji Regional CouncilMeeting hosted by Geraldton Community Health ServicePublic meeting hosted by Geraldton Regional Community Education CentreTour of Greenough Regional Prison
Kalgoorlie WA	13-14 Aug	Public meeting hosted by Legal Aid WA Secondary schools workshop Kalgoorlie-Boulder Chamber of Commerce and Industry Wongatha Regional Council Goldfield Women's Health Centre

Mackay Qld	21-22 Aug	Mackay Regional Council of Social Development Mackay Advocacy Network Kalyan Youth Services Address to Conference on Aboriginal Reconciliation
Rockhampton Qld	23-24 Aug	Meeting hosted by St Joseph's CathedralDarumbal-Noolar Murree Aboriginal Corp.Rockhampton Chamber of Commerce Public meeting hosted by Rockhampton City Council
Biloela Qld	24 Aug	Meeting with community groups hosted by Women's Health Centre
Peterborough SA	24 Sept	Address to SA Country Women's Association ConferencePeterborough High School Student Representative Council Public meeting hosted by Anglican Church
Alice Springs NT	5, 6, 9 Oct	Public meeting hosted by Alice Springs HospitalNT Cattlemen's AssociationMeeting hosted by Papunya Regional CouncilMeetings with young people and youth workers hosted by Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Services Tour of Alice Springs Correctional Centre and Aranda House
Tennant Creek NT	6 Oct	Public meeting hosted by Yapakurlangu Regional Council
Papunya and Yuendumu NT	7-8 Oct	Community meetings
Scone NSW	11 Nov	Public meeting hosted by Scone Shire Council
Euroa Vic	18 Nov	Public meeting hosted by Shire of Strathbogie
Bendigo Vic	18-19 Nov	Public meeting hosted by Bendigo City CouncilCountry AIDS NetworkGolden City Support Services Meetings with young people and community services workers hosted by the Salvation Army
Ballarat Vic	20 Nov	Public meeting hosted by Ballarat City Council
Cairns Qld	26-27 Nov	Address to ACROD National ConferenceMeetings with young people and with youth workers hosted by the Youth Services Network Meeting hosted by ATSIC
Mareeba Qld	26 Nov	Public meeting hosted by Mareeba Shire CouncilMareeba Reconciliation Group

Providing basic health services

The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights article 12]

Inadequate, inaccessible and diminishing health services emerged as the principal concern of participants in *Bush Talks* meetings and in submissions. Yet there is a greater need in rural and remote areas.

"Research suggests that the general health of rural people is, by urban standards, very poor. Rural populations have above average rates of premature mortality and death through heart disease, cancer, suicide and tuberculosis. Poverty and the associated family problems which arise from income deprivation are higher in rural than urban areas. The health status of Aborigines is disgraceful. Aborigines have a mortality rate over four times that for non-Aboriginal people and life expectancy is about 20 years lower.

"The recent evaluation of the Rural Communities Access Program also found that stress related problems are on the increase. Rural health workers reported increased substance abuse, low morale and depression; and long hours of work that lead to greater risk of accidents and withdrawal from community activities and involvement. With the closure of support services and the difficulty of accessing medical services, families have less access to help." [Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, *Valuing Rural Communities*, 1998, pages 11 and 12]

Health policy

"Rationalisation of services continues to be a key strategy of governments to achieve cost constraint, reduction, economies of scale, and efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. This has involved the centralisation and regionalisation of services in rural Australia into larger regional centres. Governments are increasingly locating services in areas of greatest population demand. This strategy is having an increasing detrimental effect on the local delivery of services in small towns in rural communities." [National Farmers' Federation, *Trends in the Delivery of Rural Health, Education and Banking Services*, 1997, page 8]

The same picture of government policies leading to inadequate services emerged in every State and the Northern Territory. Participants at a meeting in Burnie Tasmania complained of "little co-ordination of services" and that "fragmentation is occurring as a result of short-term government grants and privatisation of health services". In Port Augusta *SA Bush Talks* was told that "[mental health] services are only given short-term funding but it takes time to get established, become known and earn the confidence and trust of locals". Many common areas of concern were identified.

Hospital cuts

Many country towns have witnessed cutbacks in hospital services in recent years. In Geraldton WA *Bush Talks* was told that the hospital had recently closed 29 beds, reducing the total to 60 beds. The average number of patients is 60, but the peak to date has been 73. In Biloela Qld "a few years ago the hospital had two full-time doctors". Now the only doctors practising at the hospital are GPs in private practice who were said to limit themselves to four appointments daily at the hospital.

In 1997 *The Land* reported that between 1988 and 1995, 5,000 hospital beds had closed in NSW and that 30 hospitals, the majority in rural areas, had been closed, downgraded or privatised [8 August 1996, page 7].

> Heaven help anyone who has a heart attack, major accident or haemorrhage from now on, because with the downgrade of the hospital services our one and only ambulance with its one and only driver will have to get that person to hospital in Albury or Wodonga 125 kms away. How can he drive and care for a seriously ill patient? [Submission from V Heeney, Corryong Victoria]

"The level of expenditure per available hospital bed declines sharply with increasing rurality, for both public and private hospitals. In 1995-96, the rate of expenditure in comparison to 'capital cities' was 20% less in 'large rural centres' and 54% less in the 'remainder' of Australia." [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Health in Rural and Remote Australia*, 1998, page 80.]

Mental health services

Participants expressed alarm at the lack of mental health services - counselling, psychiatric, hostel, in-patient - in rural and remote areas, especially services suitable for young people. In Port Macquarie NSW *Bush Talks* was told

- "there has been no increase in mental health beds in local hospitals in spite of the increased population in recent years"
- the one adolescent mental health worker is "not enough to meet the needs of young people with mental health problems"
- there is no psychiatric registrar at the hospital and
- "the area has never been able to meet the needs of after hours crisis".

In Port Augusta SA, "there are minimal services within the region and even then there are great distances to travel". Two psychiatrists visit from Adelaide one day each month; outreach services visit remote communities one day each month and the telelink psychiatric service is only available for emergencies.

In Geraldton WA there is no specialist in child and adolescent mental health. In Central West Queensland "there is no-one to provide counselling services and a lot of young people are struggling with mental health problems". In Rockhampton Qld there is no permanent child psychiatrist. In nearby Biloela Qld a psychiatrist, a psychiatric nurse and a social worker visit once each month but "this is not enough for people who are in a critical condition" and "people always see a different person and waste time telling their history over again".

Even in Wagga Wagga NSW, that State's largest inland city, there is no resident psychiatrist. Psychiatrists have to be flown in on circuit to see patients by appointment.

> Mental health services are abysmal in the bush, almost non-existent, as is detox for alcoholism which is rife, marriage counselling, respite, palliative care, legal services, etc etc. These are of course all related. [Submission from E Stafford, Kuranda Qld]

A representative from a shelter for women and children escaping domestic violence told *Bush Talks* in Rockhampton Qld

> We often get inappropriate referrals to us of women with mental illnesses ... For women with mental health, drug and alcohol issues there is nowhere to go.

Death rates from suicide per 100,000 population

	Metropolitan		Rural			Remote	
	Capital	Other	Large centres	Small centres	Other	Centres	Other
Male	19.2	21.7	23.8	22.6	23.9	22.6	29.9
Female	5.2	5.0	4.4	4.5	4.3	3.3	4.1

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Health in Rural and Remote Australia*, 1998, page 53.

Economic downturn with the resulting sense of hopelessness and despair is a major factor contributing to the high rate of rural suicides. A lot of people who get put on the economic scrapheap through no fault of their own feel an enormous sense of worthlessness. [Albany WA, August 1998]

"The poor state of rural mental health is exacerbated by a paucity of research into rural mental health issues which creates a vicious cycle - lack of research leads to lack of information which inevitably leads to lack of funding and lack of services. The overall result is that rural mental health services and research are a neglected issue." [Guy Cumes, 'Rural mental health: Policy, practice and law' in Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, *Quality of Life in Rural Australia*, 1998, page 42]

Aboriginal health services

Aboriginal ill-health and high mortality are seemingly intractable problems.

> For Aboriginal Australians:
> - Life expectancy is 20 years less than for non-Aboriginal Australians.
> - Aboriginal boys born today have only a 45% chance of living to age 65 (85% for non-Aboriginal boys); Aboriginal girls have a 54% chance of living to age 65 (89% for non-Aboriginal girls).
> - Over the last forty years, the Aboriginal infant mortality rate has declined (though it is still over three times the national average); over the same period, adult mortality in the Aboriginal population has increased. [Submission from Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Alice Springs NT]

With high rates of diabetes and resulting kidney disease among Aboriginal people, the lack of accessible dialysis is deplorable. Wongai residents of the Ngaanyatjara Lands and other communities in the Central Desert region of WA must go to Kalgoorlie or Perth for dialysis. "People can't bear to be away from their land and family and some have chosen to return home. It really breaks a Wongai's heart when he has to go away." But without dialysis, patients will die [Kalgoorlie WA, August 1998]. In the Northern Territory, dialysis is only available in Darwin and Alice Springs. "People in need of these services are forced to move as far away as Tennant Creek and the Barkly. This is a spiritual death sentence for these people. In addition, when family members move with them they often end up staying in the river bank as a consequence of the lack of accommodation in Alice Springs" [Alice Springs NT, October 1998].

The other major issue raised in *Bush Talks* meetings with Aboriginal people was the common ignorance of Indigenous cultures among health professionals resulting in inappropriate and often inadequate treatment. In the Northern Territory *Bush Talks* was told of junior doctors on three month rotations attending remote clinics with little knowledge of the medical conditions they were likely to encounter, little experience and little if any cultural awareness [Alice Springs NT, October 1998]. In Wiluna WA, *Bush Talks* was told, "there is a real distrust of the visiting health professionals by the community because of the constant change-over of staff" [Geraldton WA, August 1998].

> We in aged care [for Aboriginal people] are really in lack of culturally appropriate tools, because every single strategy and every single approach we take to any aged care issue are developed by Europeans and are virtually useless in this particular region. [Alice Springs NT, October 1998]

> There is no doubt that Aboriginal 'social and cultural' factors and 'location' do influence the health of our people. There is no doubt that factors such as the remoteness of Aboriginal communities, cultural divisions between 'men's business' and 'women's business', and the fact than many of our people speak English as a second (or third, or fourth) language, pose problems for Western-oriented service delivery. [Submission from Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Alice Springs NT]

In Cairns Qld *Bush Talks* was told that it was often difficult for Indigenous patients from outlying areas to understand the medical terminology and language of doctors at the Cairns hospital. The information could be about critical issues such as medications.

General practitioners

Bush Talks heard of long waits for appointments with GPs, towns without a GP for lengthy periods and towns in which not one GP would bulk bill.

"There is a rural under-supply of general practitioners of around 500; shortages occur in every State and the Northern Territory." [National Farmers' Federation, *Trends in the Delivery of Rural Health, Education and Banking Services*, 1997, page 9]

In Port Macquarie NSW "doctors are hard to attract to the town and do not stay long".

> The Shire of Jerilderie [NSW] has had, like many other rural areas throughout the State, a lot of difficulty in attracting a doctor to practise in the small town of Jerilderie. The town until just recently was in fact without a doctor for about twelve months, a situation which has the effect of frightening a lot of residents, particularly the aged, and of frustrating many others ... The community, having finally solved the doctor problem, now finds itself with a hospital which, for all intents and purposes is still open, but a hospital that the doctor is not permitted to use other than for accident and emergency cases, where he may only provide in-patient care for a maximum period of four hours. [Submission from Jerilderie Shire Council, NSW]

In Geraldton WA it was reported that patients wait up to six weeks for a non-urgent appointment and that the Aboriginal Medical Service is the only GP service to bulk bill: 40% of AMS patients are reportedly now non-Aboriginal people. In Mareeba Qld the local AMS is also treating increasing numbers of non-Aboriginal patients for the same reason. In almost every town visited *Bush Talks* was told that none of the GPs will bulk bill, except perhaps for health care card holders.

> For a considerable period the 'medical centre' has refused to bulk bill patients and at the beginning of this year the [other] surgery suddenly, en masses, had their doctors cease bulk billing, and shortly after this, my wife attended there for a regular prescription for heart medicine only to be turned way as she was unable to pay at the time of consultation, even though she offered to pay on the next pension day, but she was refused this option! [Submission from D Robinson, Mudgee NSW]

> Doctors of Busselton [WA] have developed practices which don't like to offer bulk billing on the cost of consultations. Reception staff are told to ask the potential patient, as they make their appointment, if they have the money to cover the cost and if not are denied access. The GPs themselves are approachable on this issue and do allow bulk billing when requested by the patient. I have seen young people in urgent need of medical tests being denied access at the front desk or over the phone ... It is usually the least experienced, new patients who are most likely to be harmed by such rejection as they lack the confidence to ask to see the doctor anyway or are unwilling to lie that they do have the cost of the appointment. [Submission from Geographe Youth Services, Busselton WA]

Aged care services

Australia's population is ageing. Many rural populations are ageing more rapidly as younger people leave for education, employment or lifestyle reasons.

> In small communities in WA, elderly people who wish to remain in their own homes face many problems. Withdrawal of local services is making it increasingly difficult for them to maintain an independent lifestyle. [Bunbury WA, August 1998]

> Older persons' funding is a significant issue. I think in adult services 85% of the budget goes to clinical services, whereas in aged services 93% goes to clinical services and only 7% to community based services. I see in our travels, people over 65 being isolated, not getting good access not only to psychiatric services but housing services and carer support services. I think that the geographic factors are accentuated for people over 65. They are usually less likely to have a car. [Bendigo Vic, November 1998]

In Burnie Tasmania *Bush Talks* was told that there is a six month wait for nursing home care.

Metropolitan centres and large rural centres have 400+ nursing home beds per 100,000 people over 70 years of age. In other rural areas there are one-third fewer beds and in remote centres there are fewer than half that number. "Acute care hospital beds are used to compensate for the lower supply of nursing home beds in rural and remote zones, with nursing-home-type-patients occupying 20% of hospital beds." [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Health in Rural and Remote Australia*, 1998, page 92]

Other health services

Shortage of dental services was regularly raised as an issue of concern. In Wauchope NSW there is a two and a half year wait for a dental check-up, although the dentist can fit in emergencies. In Port Macquarie NSW "there is no dental service in town for health care card holders" and the one resident dentist was reportedly only available for emergencies. Similar issues were raised in Biloela and Rockhampton Qld and Bendigo Victoria. Changes to Commonwealth support for dental services were blamed for a significant reduction in access.

On the North West Coast of Tasmania, *Bush Talks* was told, there is a five month wait for paediatric services and a two month wait for home assessment of people requiring aged care. In Bathurst NSW the nearest government disability therapist is in Orange and there is a wait of eight to nine months to obtain an initial assessment by a speech pathologist or an occupational therapist.

In Port Macquarie NSW there were concerns about a lack of services for men including screening services and cancer treatment. In Orange NSW a drug rehabilitation centre is nearby but will not accept people prior to detoxification for which they must travel to Sydney.

"The supply of primary care practitioners per head of population falls sharply in rural areas. In 'large rural centres', the supply rate was 13% below that of 'capital cities', whereas 'small rural centres' and 'other rural areas' had supply rates of 23% and 35% respectively less than 'capital cities'." [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Health in Rural and Remote Australia*, 1998, page 83]

Travel assistance

"When local services are lost people are inconvenienced and incur additional, and sometimes significant, travel costs associated with travel to larger centres to receive treatment. Access problems have been shown to have a negative effect on health status." [National Farmers' Federation, *Trends in the Delivery of Rural Health, Education and Banking Services*, 1998, page 9]

There was considerable criticism of the federally-funded, State-administered travel and accommodation assistance scheme for isolated patients needing to travel for treatment.

Eligibility for the scheme is limited: the treatment must be specialist treatment, the distance must be more than 200 km, a carer will not be funded for an adult patient, accompanying children are not covered, accommodation is only included if needed for medical reasons. Dental care, physiotherapy and other allied health care are not covered. Travel across State borders is not covered, even though an inter-State service may be closest and the scheme is funded by the Commonwealth.

In Geraldton WA, *Bush Talks* was told, there is no psychiatric hostel. Patients needing such accommodation must travel to Perth. But because hostel care is not classified as specialist treatment, financial assistance is not available.

> PATS [Patient Assisted Travel Scheme in South Australia] funds an accompanying parent with a child but it will not fund a second child who has to travel with the parent because, for example, the parent cannot leave the second child behind on an isolated property. And it will not fund an accompanying person where the patient is an adult, even though the adult may need care and assistance, especially if an overnight stop is required. [Port Augusta SA, June 1998]

Because of restrictions on eligibility, *Bush Talks* was told of cancer sufferers "taking the risk" rather than find the money to go for treatment [Bathurst NSW] and of a spinal injury patient having to pay her own airfare because she was only in a full body cast and not a wheel chair [Geraldton WA, August 1998].

Proposals and initiatives

In Aboriginal health, the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress called for a holistic approach.

> We recognise that how and where our people live can cause contradictions and problems for Western-style service delivery: *hence the importance of those services being under Aboriginal control*. It is only when health services are under our own control that we can work out the contradictions between our traditional ways of life and those of the non-Aboriginal system on our own terms. The only alternative is to have 'solutions' to these contradictions imposed upon us, solutions that have in the past required our people to give up their identity to fit in with the requirements of an alien system.
>
> ... there also needs to be a recognition that the health of our people does not depend on the health sector alone. Our people must have access to education and employment, and to all the other services and infrastructures that non-Aboriginal Australia enjoys. Cuts to these services will affect our people as well as (and probably more than) the general Australian population. In addition, our special and continuing relationship to the land must be recognised and supported, and not denigrated and denied. [Submission from Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Alice Springs NT]

Bush Talks was told of a number of rural community initiatives including efforts to attract young health professionals to return to their rural areas to practise once qualified and suicide prevention programs among young Indigenous people.

In Yeoval NSW the Yeoval Community Hospital Co-operative was formed after the closure of the District Hospital. The Co-operative provides a range of health and aged care services at one site: a doctor's surgery, hospital, physiotherapy, ambulance, X-ray unit, nursing

home, hostel and self-care units, as well as community services such as Meals on Wheels and a volunteer driver service. The Co-operative has attracted both State and Commonwealth funding.

In Manangatang Victoria local farmers agist, manage and shear 1,300 sheep owned by the District Hospital, free of charge, handing part of their wool cheque back to the hospital. Their aim is to raise funds to maintain the six-bed hospital, 10 bed nursing home, sports clubs, school and voluntary ambulance service.

The Remote and Rural Health Training Unit in Dubbo NSW presents an annual week-long health care career options program for 20 Year 10 students from rural high schools. The objective is that the young people will see the range of possible careers, take up a career in health care and return to their region to work. The planned establishment of new medical schools in Wagga Wagga NSW and Townsville Qld will also assist in training more country people for rural practice.

Commission project

The Commission's project work on rural health will be determined in consultation with experts in rural and remote area health. It will focus on innovative community initiatives to respond to country health needs. It will aim:

1. to locate the delivery of health services within a human rights framework
2. to identify successful rural and remote community initiatives and the factors contributing to their success
3. to publicise the initiatives so that others are informed and inspired.

Key areas of need are remote health services; young people, substance abuse and emotional well-being; aged care; flexible but adequate services in country towns; mental health services.

Two models are under consideration: (1) a seminar series and booklet and (2) a television series and complementary training kit, including a booklet. The choice of models is dependent upon funding and sponsorship.

Ensuring fair access to education

Everyone has the right to education. [Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 26]

School retention and completion

Children in rural and remote Australia are less likely to complete their education than children in regional and urban centres.

WA Year 11 and Year 12 dropout rates: Perth schools = 25%; country schools = between 50% and 75% [Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *National Report on Schooling in Australia*, 1996, page 63]

The factors contributing to this are varied and complex.

"Family factors, previous educational experience, inadequate access to secondary schools, the high turnover in teachers, lack of subject choices, poor skills in the use of technology, poor facilities, poor future employment prospects, and disincentives created by government assistance schemes are amongst the causal factors." [National Farmers' Federation, *Trends in the Delivery of Rural Health, Education and Banking Services*, 1997, page 31]

Agricultural workers are much less likely than others to have completed secondary school.

Level of qualifications of those working in agriculture, 1995		
Qualification	Employed in Agriculture	Australian Labour Force
Completed 4 years or less of secondary school	53.7	32.8
Completed secondary school	14.5	18.1
Completed trade, technical course and/or apprenticeship	19.4	23.2
Completed associate diploma or above	12.4	25.9
With post-school qualifications	31.8	49.1

[Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Short Report No.30, *Improved tertiary education in farm communities a priority*, 1998]

Distance education

Distance education is generally agreed to be adequate for primary students, although an unremunerated burden on the supervising parent(s). Distance education is a poor substitute for an interactive secondary school, however.

> Face to face secondary education is important for children - both for their education and for their socialisation. But most families can't afford to send their children to boarding schools. Distance education is available to Year 12 but subject choices are very limited and there is no interaction between students. Children need social contact and social education beyond the formal education curricula. They also need sport, music and social activity. Because of the difficulties children in remote areas have only 52% retention to Year 12, with boys less than 50%. It is heartbreaking for parents not to have enough money to ensure the proper education of their children. [Port Augusta SA, June 1998]

The quality of telecommunications technology is inadequate for teaching and learning in many parts of Australia.

> Equity in regard to the provision and costing of technology is also an issue. The family computer is integral to property management and it is unrealistic to assume that such a computer would be available in school hours to the children. The introduction of the Internet is hampered by both the quality of the present technology and of cost structures in telecommunications. [Submission from B White, Ivanhoe NSW]

Indigenous education

> There is a primary school in Papunya, but throughout the whole of the Papunya region there are no secondary education facilities. Students who have completed primary school therefore have to move to Alice Springs to further their education. This lack of accessible secondary education facilities is reflected in the fact that only 1% of Indigenous people in the region aged 15 years and over participate in secondary education. [Papunya NT, October 1998]

"In WA more than 55% of country students dropped out of school before Year 12 in 1996. For Aboriginal students the total was more than 84%. [*The West Australian*, 7 April 1998, page 5]

Apparent retention rates of full-time Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to Years 10, 11 and 12, all Australian schools, 1996

	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
Indigenous	75.8%	47.2%	29.2%
Non-Indigenous	97.3%	84.3%	72.4%

[Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *National Report on Schooling in Australia, 1996*, page 76]

> The poverty experienced by Aboriginal people is not just measurable in terms of individual income – it is also reflected in lack of access to the kind of resources that other Australians take for granted. Education is a good example: very few of the remote communities in Central Australia provide schooling for children beyond primary age. To obtain secondary schooling, most have to board in Alice Springs, with consequent separation from land and family. Unsurprisingly given the importance of family and country to Aboriginal people, many teenagers and their families are not prepared to make this move. As a result, for example, during the whole of 1996 only one Aboriginal person passed Year 12 in Central Australia. Given the well established link between education levels and future employment what hope do many of our kids have to get to work? [Submission from Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Alice Springs NT]

> The story that I am hearing all the time from Indigenous students is that no matter how well they do at school there is a subtle message which gets through to them that says 'because you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or South Sea Islander you won't do well'. I recently have been to an Indigenous Education (Women's) conference in Adelaide. The majority of the presenters were Aboriginal or Islander women who had done very well. But again when they were going through school they had got that message and even though they had done extremely well at school they all opted not to go on to tertiary education straight away. They had to have a buffer time where their own community had to build up their confidence and encourage them to come and try tertiary education. [School counsellor, Rockhampton Qld, August 1998]

> From going around to the schools we have found that there are very few students who survive to Year 12 and who want to go on. We have a system and tell these people, 'You have to fit into this system'; but it is not a system that they feel comfortable in at all. And we expect that they won't do well because they are Aboriginal and when they don't do well we blame then and say, 'Well, there you are you see'. And nobody looks at the system and says, 'Well, maybe we have to change the system'. [Rockhampton Qld, August 1998]

Special needs

Students with special needs including students with learning disabilities are much less likely to be catered for in rural and remote areas.

> The human rights effects of being illiterate within an English speaking community are more amplified and magnified than they are in the city. There is not a system sufficiently equipped to assist you in rural and remote areas. [Alice Springs NT, October 1998]

> There are not enough special schools in rural areas. Often you have no choice in picking a school for your children. [Wagga Wagga NSW, April 1998]

> There is a lack of language support in the schools [for children of migrant backgrounds]. [Wagga Wagga NSW, April 1998]

> Funding is based on the number of students rather than the needs of the students. The formula needs to be re-written. [Peterborough SA, September 1998]

For many children with disabilities the choices are stark: to board in a provincial city, to be educated at home or to miss out altogether.

> There is such a reluctance from the education system to take children with special needs into schools. When we pursued it for our son there was an enormous amount of reluctance because they would have to adjust and modify their schools and their classrooms. It always came down to money. [Ballarat Vic, November 1998]

Tertiary education

Fewer rural children are entering tertiary education: 25% in 1989; 16% in 1997.

> Tertiary education is almost exclusively available only in the capital cities. Living in Adelaide is relatively costly ($175 per week board in a residential college) and many country people are not eligible for Austudy because the means test is based on assets not just income. [Peterborough SA, September 1998]

> Living in a small country town I wanted the stimulus of a more intellectual environment. To enrol in a Tertiary Institution course suited to me, I found myself travelling for hours at night on dark country roads (often in need of substantial repairs). My husband was supportive but his anxiety of me having an accident or breaking down added to the difficulties in pursuing my goal. [Quoted in submission from Ballarat Diocese Justice, Development and Peace Commission, Ballarat Vic]

"Young people who are not able to overcome the significant barriers they face are not able to fully realise the benefits that education brings for personal development; participation in cultural, recreational activities and community life; career prospects, employment; and maintaining a livelihood. Their contributions to society are constrained, particularly if they are unemployed." [National Farmers' Federation, *Trends in the Delivery of Rural Health, Education and Banking Services*, 1997, page 41]

Proposals and initiatives

In Mackay Qld, *Bush Talks* was told of the 'SAO Program' which has been operating for a number of years. It is aimed at young people with behavioural problems who have been ousted from mainstream schooling. The program works to reintegrate them into the mainstream school system. In Rockhampton Qld the Aboriginal Student Support Association was described. It is a committee which arranges a cultural awareness day, visits to the local Dreaming Cultural Centre, invites prominent Aboriginal role models into schools - sportsmen, storytellers, chefs - to show Indigenous young people a range of possibilities for their future.

In 1992 the Aboriginal community of Papunya NT presented a proposal to the Education Minister for schooling in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge. The aim is to address the community's findings that "the education system at present is failing us on both sides" and "only 30% of Aboriginal children in Central Australia are involved within this education system". The proposal suggests that Aboriginal teachers should be appointed to

have been slowly pared away. In Port Augusta SA this phenomenon was described to *Bush Talks* as "the dying town syndrome?. Remote and isolated communities are still waiting for the basic means of survival and well-being.

> You will be aware that most of the complaints rural people have relate to provision of services or lack thereof. The excuse given by government (if you can call it that) is that they are already subsidising rural Australia on a per capita basis. This may well be so and will always be the case if a nation (and I hope this one still does) believes the role of government is to provide essential services. [Submission from B Hickson, Rolleston Qld]

> This country 40-50 years ago was building physical and social infrastructure with far less rural population and far less GDP and government funding. Yet now we're being told the nation can't afford it. [Perth WA, August 1998]

Child care, Family Court counselling, veterans' support, court circuit reductions, inappropriate Social Security eligibility criteria and legal aid have all been mentioned in *Bush Talks*

Government reports have shown that, in relation to access to social services, people living in communities of between 5,000 and 10,000 face what they describe as 'considerable' disadvantage, while those living in communities of below 5,000 people face 'extreme' disadvantage. Those living in isolated areas are especially affected. They face a 'lack of information' about what is available; the absence or inaccessibility of many service; poorer quality services; higher costs associated with accessing services; inappropriate urban service and funding models and poorly motivated staff.

"Micro-economic reform which has been underpinning policy development at all levels of government in Australia, has had a huge impact on rural communities. As governments seek to use their resources more efficiently they cut costs by closing services such as schools and hospitals which are deemed unviable as they do not have enough students or clients to justify their existence in monetary terms. This becomes a vicious cycle as rural populations are declining, which results in the closure of services, which in turn make it difficult to attract new population." [Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, Valuing rural communities, 1998, page 15]

Employment

Both a cause and an effect of the withdrawal of services from rural Australia is unemployment. There are other causes, too, including the changing profiles of rural industries.

> I am worried by unemployment in the very small towns. If you speak with the people who are unemployed, you get the impression that they feel that they are the ones who are being discussed as the problem. This calls not for schemes such as work for the dole, but for a real mind shift within the country to say that there is a certain amount of work available and that it must be shared fairly. The market must not drive everything. [Ballarat Vic. November 1998]

> There's existing in Australia now a generation that knows nothing else except welfare subsistence. Maybe our country is in danger of moving towards the creation of an underclass of people who will always be locked out of participating in society and will always need to be dependent on the community completely. That to me is a violation of human rights. [Bendigo Vic. November 1998]

full-time permanent positions and that the Papunya Community Council should participate fully in teacher recruitment. The proposal has yet to receive a response from the Minister.

The National Farmers' Federation recommended in 1997 that

- governments develop resource allocation policies to ensure that scarce resources are allocated to meet the special needs of rural and remote students and schools
- governments and private sector providers review their models of education delivery and their information technology strategies to improve the delivery of post-compulsory education to secondary and tertiary students in rural and remote communities
- a national rural and remote education and training strategy be developed by the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to set educational targets at the post-compulsory secondary, TAFE and higher education levels, address the barriers faced by rural and remote Australians in post-compulsory education, and educational research needs.

Commission project

In 1999 the Commission will conduct a national inquiry into school education in rural and remote Australia. The inquiry will cover

- the availability and accessibility of both primary and secondary schooling
- the quality of educational services, including technological support services and
- whether the education available to children with disabilities, Indigenous children and children from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds complies with their human rights.

Examples of topics for evidence, submissions and comments are

- costs for families
- social security
- funding models
- teacher incentives
- cultural appropriateness.

There will be some public hearings and discussion groups. Written comments, submissions and community, family or individual experiences can be provided to the inquiry. The closing date is 30 September 1999.

By mail	Rural and Remote Education Inquiry GPO Box 5218, Sydney NSW 1042
By e-mail	bushtalks@hreoc.gov.au
By phone	1300 369 530
By fax	02 9284 9849

Meeting other essential needs

> Everyone, as a member of society, ... is entitled to realization ... of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality. [Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 22]

> The basic ingredients of a country town are being eroded – that sense of belonging is diminishing. That's placing greater pressure on the big centres like Geraldton. [Geraldton WA, August 1998]

Bush Talks has heard that country towns and even larger centres are progressively losing key services and critical subsidies. Many communities in rural Australia are under siege: they have declining populations, declining incomes, declining services and a declining quality of life. The infrastructure and community of many rural, regional and remote towns

Jobs lost in regional Australia 1996 - 1998: *Australian Bureau of Statistics*			
Agriculture, forestry, fishing	10,500	Banks	4,800
Coalmining	3,800	Steelworks	2,750
Telstra	2,266	Meatworks	1,944
Clothing	1,044		
Metalliferous mining	900		
Manufacturing	530		

Bank closures

Mullewa [WA] is advertised as the wildflower capital of the country and tourists are shocked when they arrive there and there is no bank for them to visit [closed 1993]. Local businesses do have eftpos. However, this is not practical for some people - elderly people refuse to use it and people with disabilities may not be able to. These people have to travel to Geraldton to do their banking. Thus they bring all their wealth here and then do their shopping here as well. [Geraldton WA, August 1998]

Basic services such as banks, supermarkets, butchers, fruit and vegetable outlets are no longer available. The lack of local banking creates risks for local small businesses, through their being forced to hold cash on site. [Submission from Ballarat Diocese Justice, Development and Peace Commission, Ballarat Vic]

"Downsizing by banks and other financial institutions has led to the closure of over 400 bank branches between 1991 and 1996 nationwide. Non-metropolitan areas have borne a disproportionate share of this reduction in access to bank branches. Over the same period, the profits of the major banks increased, with the National Australia Bank's profit increasing from $500 million in 1991 to $2 billion in 1996." [Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, Valuing rural communities, 1998, page 36]

"The Taskforce found that 45 shires across Western Australia have no direct access to a bank branch. The combined population of those shires is over 89,000. [Report of the Regional Financial Services Taskforce, 1997, page 5]

"When a bank closes it costs the community an estimated $350 per person per month as people transfer their shopping to their banking town. From 1993 to 1998, 481 non-metropolitan bank branches shut, with the loss of about 10,000 jobs. [Asa Wahlquist, Great Dividing Rage, *The Weekend Australian*, 26 September 1998]

Telecommunications

With telephone service delays up to three working days and possibly five days over a weekend, we are left without any means of communication at all. The area concerned affects people living on farms, and most are at least 50km to 150km from their nearest medical help. [Submission from E Jones, J Sunnek, J Sanderson and J Couchman, Condobolin NSW]

I have to ring STD more than not to access government departments. Recently some have adopted the practice of using answering machines giving long often totally irrelevant information while asking you to wait. This all costs money. Why couldn't it be possible to have local access to government departments? One of the big issues for rural people is that they are information poor. [Submission from J Covell, Toogoolawah Qld]

The ability of people everywhere to do virtually everything is becoming more and more dependent on data communications. As we are, like many rural people,

restricted to 2400bps or less, almost all Internet applications are unavailable to us. [Submission from J and J Denham, Elong Elong NSW]

If people who live in rural Australia are to be able to compete on a mythical level playing field they must be given equal access to communication services as their metropolitan based business people enjoy. [Submission from the Highway Safety Action Group of NSW Inc., Molong NSW]

"The costs of engaging in high technology communications is currently a disincentive to establishing new business in rural NSW." [NSW Rural Communities Consultative Council, *Report*, 1997, page 45]

Public transport

Due to the withdrawal of rail services, people in rural communities who don't have a private car are deprived of transport, thus the additional limitations and restrictions which are applicable to job opportunities and accessing medical services. [Submission from the Highway Safety Action Group of NSW Inc., Molong NSW]

Transport for people in country areas once they can no longer drive is a major issue. Public transport is almost non-existent in country areas. The government does have some transport schemes in place but if you have an elderly person or a person with a disability who needs to come in for a doctor's appointment, they may have 70km to come and no transport to get here. [Ballarat Vic, November 1998]

There are insufficient buses, although there are unlimited taxis going day and night. It is particularly bad for older people, who have a fear of taxis. Elderly ladies have got to walk. You see them walking. It's a long way from town ... you see them walking in the hot sun, carting kids, old grandma with grandkids ... it's a disgrace. [Mareeba Qld, November 1998]

Transport in the region is so poor that it may be necessary to stay overnight simply because there is no transport home. Someone going from Port Augusta to Whyalla by public transport, for example, cannot travel there and back in the same day. [Port Augusta SA, June 1998]

Many young clients – even if we can find them a job or an interview – unless they have a licence and their own car they can't even get to the appointment. [Geraldton WA, August 1998]

"Lack of transport limits the access young people have to health services, to education and to employment, all of which have an adverse effect on their health. For people under the age of 18, the lack of public transport means that they are reliant on others for transport. For example, Hillier et al (1996) in a study of 860 young people in rural towns in Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania found that young people under the age of 18 were mainly driven to the nearest regional centre by their parents (84%), creating difficulties for young people whose parents are not supportive of their needs." [Youth Research Centre, Young People Living in Rural Australia in the 1990s, 1998, page 10]

Housing

Bush Talks was told about serious shortages of affordable private rental accommodation in Mareeba Qld, Port Macquarie NSW, Kalgoorlie WA and elsewhere. We heard allegations of discrimination against young people and single parent families by real estate agents in Bunbury WA and Bendigo Victoria, against Aboriginal people in Wauchope NSW and Mareeba Qld, and against people with disabilities in Bendigo Victoria.

Many Indigenous families still have inadequate shelter.

[Photo "A" here or about here: caption] Commissioner Sidoti and Ms Barbara Flick meeting with community members, Papunya NT

> The permanent population of the town camps is approximately 1,200-1,800 people, residing in only 183 houses and 70 tin sheds. The fact that 40% of the population is 15 years and under makes the shortage of housing even more acute. [Alice Springs NT, October 1998]

> A housing needs survey found that $32 million is required to bring Aboriginal housing up to other standards in the region. But they are falling further behind and were only able to spend $2 million this year. There are only 300 houses for 3,500 people on the Pitjantjatjara Lands. [Port Augusta SA, June 1998]

Crisis accommodation is also limited in rural Australia and virtually non-existent in remote areas. In Bendigo Victoria *Bush Talks* was advised by one community service, "We have about ten applications for crisis housing for every one to which we can respond".

> Women and children who live in rural communities are well supported. To remove a woman and children if there is no accommodation available in that town [in the event of domestic violence], takes them away from friends, family support, services that they trust and education services. They are basically uprooted from things that have become their whole lifestyle in a rural town. [But they have to move] because low rental and public housing is unavailable in these communities. They have to relocate to the provincial cities. [Bendigo Vic, November 1998]

> If a woman is suffering domestic violence and has to move to Atherton [from Mareeba], she is leaving her support, and her children have to change schools, so what happens is she comes back the next day. She doesn't want to be away from her family ... it is sending the women away, and they end up being the ones suffering while the guy stays here. [Mareeba Qld, November 1998]

Water

The States Parties recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family ... [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights article 11]

In 1994 the Commission reported on the delivery of water to Indigenous communities. At that time

- 154,000 Australians lived in 1,200 communities of between 30 and 1,000 people each were without a reticulated water supply [HREOC, *Water*, 1994, page 12]
- about 21,000 of those people were Aboriginal and 90% of them were living in WA and NT [page 18]
- another 19,000 Aboriginal people were served by water supply schemes having insufficient capacity to meet the reasonable water demands of their communities and about 75% of them were living in Queensland and NT [page 18]
- about 14,500 Aboriginal people relied on water not complying with National Health & Medical Research Council guidelines on water quality [page 19]

Bush Talks heard that rural people pay dearly for their water.

> The water rates surely must be the highest in Australia $5 per kilolitre, (90 cents in Adelaide, something like $2.30 in Alice Springs where people think this is too high). In the 1990s this is a bad situation, a dusty place very hot in summer, a

basic resource priced so high. [Submission from Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta Aboriginal Corporation, Coober Pedy SA]

Indigenous communities reported continuing difficulties

- Barrell Well WA: water carted 120 km from Geraldton for more than 2 years
- Mt Margaret WA: asbestos pipes
- Coonana WA: untested and untreated dam water
- Wiluna WA: fears of radioactivity
- Cosmo Newbury WA: high summer salinity

The impacts are far-reaching.

> Chronic ear disease, due to unsatisfactory hygiene and malnutrition, can result in poor hearing and sometimes deafness. This is a big problem, especially for young Aboriginal people throughout NT. As commented by one participant: 'The fact is when you can't hear school it is incredibly boring so you stop going, and when you don't go to school, you have all day in front of you and you got to do something! That's when you get into trouble, sniff petrol, start stealing things and with the mandatory sentencing you end up going to jail. All this is because this because of the insufficient access to clean water and proper food. [Alice Springs NT, October 1998]

Proposals and initiatives

Strong arguments were made for revision of funding models for rural services.

> Funding of community services is based on an urbocentric model that doesn't take into account a whole lot of factors that are experienced in the bush. We get the same amount of money for a person who lives in the centre of Bendigo as for a person who lives out at Newstead or Bridgewater and the dollars just don't go anywhere near providing the same level of service across that geographical distance. The urbocentric model doesn't take into account travel costs. [Bendigo Vic, November 1998]

> Governments must acknowledge the fact that *people* live in rural communities and need to be recognised as being a part of society rather than part of an economy. [Submission from the Highway Safety Action Group of NSW Inc., Molong NSW]

In Cockburn SA, *Bush Talks* was told, the local Progress Association took over the post office when Australia Post pulled out and even threatened to demolish the building. Progress Association members now deliver all mail in the area on a voluntary basis.

The 1,100 people of Rupanyup and Minyip Victoria responded decisively when three major banks ceased operations in those towns in February 1998. They established a community bank with $270,000 raised locally. Three-quarters of residents have since joined the bank which operates in partnership with the Bendigo Bank. Other Victorian and NSW communities are expected to follow this example.

Commission projects

The States Parties ... recognize the right of everyone ... to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights article 15]

1. In 1999 the Race Discrimination Commissioner, Zita Antonios, will follow up the Commission's report on the supply of water to Indigenous communities by reviewing particular aspects of the arrangements for supply.

2. A major aspect of the Commission's National Inquiry into Education in Rural and Remote Australia will be the quality of telecommunications support to rural and remote schools and for distance education including for Internet access, video conferencing and teacher in-service training.

Valuing children and young people

> Special measures of protection and assistance should be taken on behalf of all children and young persons without any discrimination for reasons of parentage or other conditions [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights article 10]
>
> States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being ... [Convention on the Rights of the Child article 3]

Far from being cherished in public policy, children and young people throughout Australia bear the brunt of unemployment, reduced services, diminishing income support and increasingly punitive criminal justice processes.

> We are marginalising them and saying we don't want them in our space. [Orange NSW, July 1998]
>
> About 18 months ago I was doing 17 hours a week study and I was trying to get on Austudy. Austudy told me that I didn't have enough hours to get Austudy and sent me to Social Security. There they told me that I had too many hours of study to get unemployment benefit. [Bendigo Vic. November 1998]
>
> Young people are happy to contribute to society but political rhetoric scapegoats them. The community sees children as problems to be endured, not our future to be nurtured. [Port Augusta SA, June 1998]

Speakers at *Bush Talks* meetings and submissions to *Bush Talks* expressed deep concern about the lack of opportunities for young people in rural communities.

> While there is a strong sense of community co-operation in a small town, the increasing rationalisation of all services, especially health does not encourage the young to remain in the district due to lack of employment and social opportunities. [Submission from Margaret Dent, Lostock via Gosford NSW]
>
> Young people are particularly vulnerable as isolation, social decline and lack of employment combine to give them a choice of leaving or having a very restricted lifestyle. [Submission from Mid-North Coast Rural Counselling Service, Macksville NSW]
>
> There is no after hours transport. No safe amusement places. Venues that there are tend to attract rough kids. So parents don't want them to go there. [Rockhampton Qld, August 1998]
>
> Boredom is a big problem for young people in non-metropolitan areas and is a major contributing factor to youth offending. [Orange NSW, July 1998]

In December 1998 the unemployment rate for 15-19 year olds looking for full-time work was 26.5% compared with 7.7% for all persons. [Australian Bureau of Statistics]

"Unemployment rates are higher in rural areas and in some Aboriginal communities as high as 95% (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1994). Unemployment contributes directly to the destruction of rural communities, and it places greater strains on the provision of support services for those who remain." [Youth Research Centre, *Young People Living in Rural Australia in the 1990s*, 1998, page 14]

Young people and police

Young people reported experiencing police harassment and a number of adult speakers agreed that negative perceptions abound. In Alice Springs NT youth workers and young people advised *Bush Talks* that young people are being fined for loitering on public streets and given restraining orders to keep away from the mall. Young people have been jailed for not paying fines and for petty offences such as jaywalking. Several of the young people attending the *Bush Talks* meeting had experienced one form or another of police harassment, typically verbal abuse but also physical assaults.

[Photo "B" at or about here: caption] Ms Barbara Flick meeting night patrol members, Papunya NT

> Every time they see you in a group they class us as a gang and they take you around the corner and search you. We might muck around a bit but that's it. [Young man, Mackay Qld, August 1998]

> Once I was in a car with four friends and they took down all our names and addresses. They searched the car, made us open our wallets and bags. We didn't know they had no right to do that. Police should have a reason to suspect that there are drugs in the car (or something illegal) ... I also had my name taken down for being in a group on the street. That's bad. [Young woman, Mackay Qld, August 1998]

> Late at night, riding around with my brother, the police pulled us over. They searched me, and I had nothing on me. I had the good police officer, but my brother was over the other side and the police officer was belting him. The police officer who was talking to me went over there to stop it but he sent the other police officer over to me. [Young man, Bendigo Vic, November 1998]

"Because young people in many rural towns do not have 'legitimate' places where they can gather, they are often seen as a social threat if they gather in public places, such as the main street, the football oval, or other places where, officially, they do not have a reason to gather.

"Omulzcek et al (1990) found that young people in rural communities in Western Australia were four more times likely to be questioned by police as young people in urban areas." [Youth Research Centre, *Young People Living in Rural Australia in the 1990s*, 1998, page 18]

> It is difficult to be anonymous in a small town. A young person who has problems with police, even only on one occasion, tends to be labelled thereafter as a troublemaker. If a similar incident occurs again, the police automatically think that young person had something to do with it. [Bunbury WA, August 1998]

Access to services

Bush Talks was told that these negative perceptions exclude young people from employment opportunities and housing.

> Landlords often require references, but young people when they move out for the first time or lack experience rarely can comply, and are thus uncompetitive for housing.
>
> Housing that is made available to young people is often substandard or very old, but they are often required to maintain impossible standards of housekeeping or face eviction. [Submission from Geographe Youth Services, Busselton WA]

"Many rural and remote communities lack the essential service infrastructure required to support young people and their families. If family support services are thin on the ground in major centres, they may be practically non-existent in rural parts of Australia. While local community support networks still exist in rural and remote communities, the changing social and economic circumstances in these communities no longer provides the safety net it once did for people when they are in crisis." [House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *A Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness*, 1995, page 329]

> Homelessness amongst young people is common, and is a significant problem amongst local high school students. These young people are accommodated temporarily in the homes of friend's families, who provide a safe secure home for a limited period. These young people are homeless and in affect many areas of their lives. [Submission from Geographe Youth Services, Busselton WA]

Bush Talks was told there is a high rate of youth homelessness in Cairns. It is seen as the 'end of the line' for people south of Cairns, especially in winter. Yet there are only 8 crisis accommodation beds for young people in the town.

Youth services

Young people in rural communities who have problems with drugs or alcohol often have difficulty getting access to appropriate treatment and other support services.

> There is an urgent need for a residential drug rehabilitation facility in the local area. Having to travel long distances to access such a service is difficult, expensive and alienating. It is especially problematic for young people from Indigenous communities. [Orange NSW, July 1998]

Youth suicide

Many young people feel pessimism and even despair. Alarming youth suicide figures mask disturbing trends in unsuccessful suicide attempts and depression in rural and remote communities. In Bendigo Victoria a young person told *Bush Talks*, "I've seen three people try in the last two years".

> Many young people in the local community feel that they have no future. [Albany WA, August 1998]
>
> I think something associated with that [suicide] is teenage pregnancy. There is nowhere in Bendigo for people who are our age and pregnant and don't know what to do. There is such discrimination against teenagers who are pregnant. [Bendigo Vic, November 1998]

In 1986 there were 24 suicides per 100 000 males aged 15-24 years in rural areas. By 1995 that figure had risen to 34. [Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Youth Australia. A Social Report*, 1997, page 38]

The Indigenous youth suicide rate is 1.4 times the non-indigenous rate. [Department of Health and Family Services, *Youth Suicide in Australia. A Background Monograph*, 1997, page 3]

At least 30% of young people who attempt suicide are lesbian, gay or bisexual. [National Children's and Youth Law Centre, *Rights Now*, January 1998, page 4]

" A number of studies have linked the high male suicide rate in rural communities with the high levels of community intolerance for gay people." [Youth Research Centre, *Young People Living in Rural Australian in the 1990s*, 1998, page 17]

"Beneath the tip of the iceberg of suicide lies the much larger issue of youth mental health. Depression is now one of the most common mental health problems experienced by young people. It is frequently a cause of significant problems such as school failure, family and peer disengagement and substance misuse. It is a major risk factor for youth suicide. Between one half and three quarters of all suicides are linked to depression." [National Health & Medical Research Council, *Depression in Young People: Clinical Practise Guidelines*, 1997]

Proposals and initiatives

"Life and a future in a country town or rural area should be a viable option for young Australians. A critical foundation for this is the creation of permanent work opportunities in country areas." [Submission from the Australian Young Christian Workers Movement, Sydney NSW]

"Dealing with youth problems is not just about *them*. It is also about *us*. As a community we should be trying to do more to give them jobs and other opportunities. It has a lot to do with how businesses and other organisations spend their money." [Albany WA, August 1998]

"If we don't complement what exists with a support network, these young people are just going to fall through the net ... if you don't spend time with them and build up a relationship, they don't realise that a lot of their own behaviour and attitudes are causing the problems, and they are not understanding that a lot of their own attitudes are causing rejection. I'm talking about a really structured, stable network of trained workers that can teach them the games that they play, and how not to get caught in the games, teaching them to empower themselves and teaching them to grow. It won't happen until you get one on one with them and you deal with the root of the problem. At the moment we've got this lawn and we are mowing the weeds, and we're not getting down to the roots." [Cairns Qld, November 1998]

"Even some senior police express qualms about the way law-abiding teenagers are increasingly being targeted by indiscriminate sweeps designed to root out a small minority of trouble-makers." [*Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend*, 22 November 1997, page 18]

In North West Tasmania, *Bush Talks* was told, local community service organisations were concerned by the high level of suicide among young people. They knew that many suicides were of young gay men and lesbians but that these young people were rarely visible and seldom sought support from local community service agencies. They also knew that there were many outspoken opponents of repeal of Tasmania?s anti-gay criminal laws in North West Tasmania and that the area had seen meetings at which some of the most virulent anti-gay hatred had been preached. They feared the effect of these local events on young people struggling to establish their identities as gay or lesbian. These agencies cooperated in an extensive study of issues confronting young gay men and lesbians in the area and

published the results in 'Working it out now'. They have decided on many initiatives to ensure that these young people are supported and affirmed in their own communities and that they are no longer forced to leave.

Commission projects

> In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. [Convention on the Rights of the Child article 3]

1. All government activity which affects children, including local government spending decisions, the actions of police officers, hospital closures and development approvals, must take the best interests of children into account. The Commission will publish a Guide on taking children's best interests into account for the information of all sectors of government and of private social welfare institutions which are also covered.

2. The Commission continues to evaluate and comment upon State and Territory juvenile justice systems. In the 1997 report *Seen and heard: priority for children in the legal process* the Commission, jointly with the Australian Law Reform Commission, recommended the development of national standards for juvenile justice. The report detailed many of the provisions which should be included and the Commission is committed to pursuing the further development and implementation of national standards. The report also found that mandatory imprisonment for juvenile offenders in WA and the NT violates their human rights.

3. The Commission will co-ordinate a National Program on the Human Rights of Young Gays and Lesbians in Rural Australia. The program will be undertaken in partnership with a wide range of community organisations. It will aim to raise awareness of the serious problems faced by these young people and to develop medium and long-term strategies to overcome them. The program will establish a national network of young rural gays and lesbians and relevant organisations to facilitate advocacy, mutual support, exchange of information and collaboration through joint projects. The program is funded, in part, by the Australian Youth Foundation.

Building communities

> *... recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. [Universal Declaration of Human Rights preamble]*

Bush Talks heard of intolerance towards young people, gay and lesbian people and Aboriginal people and of very serious disadvantages faced by these groups, people with disabilities and people from non-English speaking backgrounds, particularly in obtaining necessary services in rural and remote areas.

Aboriginal experiences

Indigenous people constitute around 2% of Australia's population. Like other Australians, most Indigenous people live in urban centres. However, Indigenous people continue to constitute well above 2% of the population of many rural and remote areas. They make up 25% of the population of the NT. Intolerance and discrimination exacerbate consistently poor living conditions.

> They'll only employ Aboriginal people if they get money from ATSIC. Or if it's a traineeship. As soon as the traineeship's over, that's it. They pick up somebody else. [Cairns Qld, November 1998]

There are a small number of Aboriginal people employed by the local and State Government Services. In the retail sector and in manufacturing, there are few, if any, Aboriginal people. This lack of employment of Aboriginal people in the Greater Taree City Council area has serious consequences for their communities. Aboriginal children often do not see any reason to finish their education. It is a rare few who finish high school. The confidence of young Aboriginal people is often low. [Submission from H Hannah, Glenthorne NSW]

Why do people get educated if there is no end product? It doesn't matter if you are in a small country town in the Northern Territory or out in Arnhem land, or in Mareeba, but if there are no employment prospects for Indigenous people and there hasn't been any for their parents ... the parents cannot see the point in sending their kids to school because they'll end up highly educated but with nothing to go to [Mareeba Qld, November 1998]

Short-sighted government policies were identified as key factors in perpetuating Indigenous disadvantage.

Governments in this country have the whole concept back to front. They spend a lot of money getting prepared for when our kids come into the prison system. Not if, When. You'd think they'd put all that money into preventing them. That's a part of the discrimination. The Government's closing down schools and building prisons. [Geraldton WA, August 1998]

The whole government system is structured to discriminate against Aboriginal people. If Aboriginal people had equal access we wouldn't need ATSIC, Aboriginal Legal Services and other special measures. The system suits them [non-Aboriginal people] fine and they think if it suits them fine it should suit everyone fine. But it doesn't.

If we were to shut down all the Aboriginal programs and services, how would that help the under-privileged non-Aboriginal people? It wouldn't. It's a drop in the ocean. There are so many more under-privileged non-Aboriginal people than there are Aboriginal people in total: even though more of us are disadvantaged. What they [under-privileged non-Aboriginal people and their supporters] should be arguing for is to improve delivery of services to them, not take it away from us. [Geraldton WA, August 1998]

Immigrant experiences

New immigrants to Australia predominantly settle in capital cities. People from non-English speaking backgrounds in rural Australia typically form very small communities. The lack of interpreters was the major issue they raised with *Bush Talks*.

There are about 5 accredited interpreters in the area. Interpretation at the hospital is especially a problem. For example, people are asked to sign consent forms even though they do not understand them. [Port Macquarie NSW, May 1998]

Access to interpreters may be very important at times but it is prohibitively expensive. English language classes in some smaller towns may be cancelled if enough people do not come, for example, recently in Oberon. People often miss out because they cannot get courses locally and they cannot afford to travel from town to town. [Bathurst NSW, July 1998]

Experiences of people with disabilities

Physical access continues to be a problem for many people with disabilities.

> Wheelchair access around Peterborough is almost impossible. The gutters are very high indeed and what slopes there are are too steep. Shops have step entrances. There are no access taxis (and no buses at all let alone buses with wheelchair access). A disability service provider has recommended against people returning to this and similar towns. [Peterborough SA, September 1998]

> Local government doesn't understand the level of the problems faced by people with disabilities. About 80% of public buildings in Wagga Wagga are inaccessible to people with disabilities. The building owned by the Department of Housing and occupied by that department, the police and members of Parliament is not accessible for people with disabilities. When government buildings don't comply with building regulations it is very difficult to get small shops to do so. [Wagga Wagga NSW, April 1998]

> In Armidale it is impossible to get through the airport and impossible to get on a plane. In Cowra, no airline with planes big enough for people with disabilities will land, so passengers have to go to Cudal or Orange to get on a plane. However, there is no public transport between Cowra and Orange. [Australian Quadriplegic Association (NSW)]

People with disabilities are particularly dependent on accessible transport services, both within country towns and between those towns and capital cities. The growth of regional airline networks can be of great benefit to them provided they can access the aircraft. The reduction in the use of larger aircraft, for example on routes to Tasmania, is causing concern.

Therapy, treatment and support services are often not available within the community or even within a reasonable distance.

> Many families have to move because of a child's disability because the support in the community is not adequate. [Rockhampton Qld, August 1998]

> In remote areas such as Emerald people with disabilities have real problems accessing information. The support officer for Centrelink is based in Rockhampton so it is difficult to get support if you live more remotely. Often if people have a disabled child they are forced to move or they stay and struggle with the situation. [Rockhampton Qld, August 1998]

In 1997-98 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission received 588 complaints of disability discrimination: 38.6% of all complaints received. Many more complaints of disability discrimination are dealt with under applicable State or Territory legislation. [*Annual Report 1998*]

Gay and lesbian experiences

As noted above in the section on children and young people, intolerance, discrimination and harassment also target gay and lesbian people in rural areas.

> Gay and lesbian people get a hard time. One couple was hounded out of town. And another couple was harassed with eggs thrown at the house and their rubbish bins overturned. [Peterborough SA, September 1998]

Youth experiences

> It can be very difficult trying to establish youth crisis accommodation in a small town. Many people support the idea in principle, but when it comes to setting it up things get very complicated. No-one wants it 'in their back yard'. [Bunbury WA, August 1998]

Proposals and initiatives

Racial intolerance and ignorance about Aboriginal cultures and needs are the most serious human rights issues facing Australia. Aboriginal people are at the forefront of effective remedies.

> Only Aboriginal people can solve Aboriginal problems. There are white people in roles that Aboriginal people should be in. Non-Aboriginal organisations cannot deal appropriately with Aboriginal clients. But this is still not recognised. [Orange NSW, July 1998]

> Young Aboriginal people need Aboriginal support workers as they talk in a way that they understand. [Biloela Qld, August 1998]

In Port Macquarie NSW MultiKulti was launched in May 1998. Some 65 countries of origin are represented in the area and MultiKulti aims to improve understanding, respect and appreciation of the various cultures and to inform members about their rights and sources of assistance. A similar group was established in Orange NSW in 1997. They are two of a growing number of such community organisations in rural Australia.

Disability Access Committees are having significant successes in many country towns in improving access and services for people with disabilities. Many are sponsored by local government councils and are particularly effective where the council is supportive of their work. Apathetic or hostile councils, on the other hand, leave the committees ineffectual and, within a short time, inactive.

Commission projects

1. In 1999 the Commission will seek to establish effective benchmarks for disability access to regional airlines to increase equity of access for people with disabilities. This inquiry will consider broadly the issues of access by people with disabilities to regional air services including the hardships caused when access is impossible and the costs which provision of access would impose on the airlines.

2. In 1998 the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Dodson, launched the *Tracking Your Rights* resource package. The package will be used in an Indigenous community education program on rights, anti-discrimination laws, remedies and alternative dispute resolution options.

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